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ANIMATED REALITIES IN INDIA: DOCUMENTING USING DOCUMENTARY ANIMATION – AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The animation is an expressive medium that can do all the genres in its own unique style that live action can do (Brad Bird, 2015). Broadly speaking, animation operates in two contexts - fiction and nonfiction. Known for its massive outsourcing of animation projects, India also owns a gigantic amount of indigenous animation production. Though fictional animation based on the animator's imagination accounts for huge contribution to the industry, nonfiction animation, based on reality, is also able to find some space within the industry. This paper attempts to analyze the trajectory of nonfiction animation employed in the context of Indian documentary films. The nonfiction animation is mostly used for documentary purposes and the Indian documentarists have started using the animation for the in-depth depiction of their arguments. The methodological approach of the study involves the analysis of a few Indian documentaries that used animation in one way or the other as a narrative strategy followed by the insights made by the documentarists in context to the animation used.

KEYWORDS: Nonfiction, Animation, Indian, Documentary, Narrative, Fiction, Continuous Journey & In God's Land

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Original Article

INTRODUCTION

The animation is one of the crucial visual art forms in India regarding filmmaking and representation. *The Banyan Tree (1957)* marked the inception of the art form in the country with the help of Clair Weeks, a Disney animator, through the American technical co-operation mission. However, *The Sinking of the Lusitania (1918)*, a documentary film by Winsor McCay in 1918 marked the first use of nonfiction animation by recreating the whole scene of the sinking of the ship that was hit by a German torpedo. The context of the animation, in this case, is clearly nonfiction because the filmmaker here is concerned with the real scenario that had taken place in the real world. But, generally speaking, the use of animation is produced as fictitious in nature, which is quite clear from the bigger portion of the animation production is based on the artists' imagination and fantasy. *ChotaBheem, and Motu Patlu*etc. define the best examples of the comical animation produced for commercial gains in India. However, Disney Pictures and Pixar created a huge amount of animation that is based on made-up stories and fantasy of the animators. But, specifically speaking, the documentary has been addressed as a discourse of the 'real' within the dimensions of awareness, information, and education of audience (Jayashanker & Monteiro, 2016: 1). Therefore, the engagement with the subjects and audience and the documentary practice contributes to the current stand of the field and opens up its doors for nonfiction animation.

Moreover, objective documentary engagements further widened the cinematic etiquettes of the genre in context to its formulation around actuality. Therefore, the practice highlights the Griersonian philosophy to documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson, 1933). The creative part is one of the important

elements of filmmaking including documentary as it establishes the film as an art form. However, the creative aspect of such films is much more influenced by the use of resources including illustrations based on the reality that facilitates the aesthetic feature of the documentary.

Animation techniques enhance the aesthetic characteristic of the film by broadening its visual narrative to elevate its discourse with the socio-political, economic and technological domains of the society. But the historical evidence shows that the Indian documentary films were controlled by the Films Division (FD) that did not offer much space for creative experimentation by the documentarists, which is also highlighted by John Grierson especially in the post-colonial phase of the country: "There is not enough creative urge, they do not reflect the spirit of the country both lyrically and dramatically. I am tired of Indian films on music and carvings. I think cultural India has better be forgotten. Mrs. Gandhi talks of India on the march, going forward in terms of social revolution. The films division should be more reflexive of the overwhelming story of India, its new economic and social programs, the new life for the people" (Grierson quoted in Jayashanker & Monteiro citing Jain (2013), 2016: 8). But, the changes at the global level changed the documentary practice in India also. The creative fervor was employed by the filmmakers including PromodPati*(Explorer (1968) and Perspectives (1966))*and S. Sukhdev *(And Miles to go (1965))*etc. However, the transformation of FD has revolutionized the Indian documentary by collaborating with the independent filmmakers that also affected the Functioning of the film festivals across India (Jayashanker & Monteiro, 2016: 11). The renovation paved a way to experiment the use of advanced creative methods in the documentary including animation techniques with an intention to facilitate the visual and aesthetic characteristics of the documentary. Strictly speaking, nonfiction animation operates in the context of reality to harness the power of the medium for augmented re-enactment and reconstruction.

Animating the True World

One of the stimulating functions of the documentary is its immense power of re-enactment and recording of the real world. Such quality encompasses documenting and reconstruction of a situation, person, or anything that is at least based on reality taking place in the real world. But the question is what the real world is? Paul Wells in one of his articles attempts to explore the difference between *a* beautiful village and *the* true village in context to the relevance of the two with the real life (Wells, 1997: 40). Basically, the author puts it in a quite simple fashion that a beautiful village is the result of an artist's imagination using his or her creativity (Wells, 1997: 41). The artist develops a village according to his or her own taste rather than illustrates a real setting while keeping in consideration the actual elements associated with the real-life under production, which is also based on the subjective choices but holds authentic response. Such thinking that occurs within the mind of an artist illustrates *a* world rather than *the* world which we all share (Nichols, 1997; Roe, 2013). It is extremely subjective. However, on some occasions the documentary filmmaker does not have much -choice to just use the live action camera depending on the situation and delicate positions in which the people may be; animation offers much more flexibility to capture such challenging situations. In such a case, a documentarist (animated) would try to complete the material (especially, the visual) for augmented representation of "re-enacting and re-constructing" evidence (Martellini, 2015). For instance, *Naked (Bloot)(2007)*directed by Misha Kamp for Dutch company *Submarine*.

In some cases, a documentarist wants to use the archival photographs with a broader impact by expanding their visual impact and enriched illustration. For instance, Ali Kazmi's *Continuous Journey (2004)* demonstrates a highly aesthetic representation of archival photographs for the augmented visual narrative of the film. Therefore, animation has already found a special place to tell a true tale or at least facilitates it. Such animation that does operate with nonfiction

sense to offer documentary function is known as "animation with the documentary sense" by Paul Wells (Wells, 1998). The documentary animation is being utilized by Indian documentarists to augment the narrative (visual) of their stories. For instance, *In God's Land (2013)* by Pankaj Rishi Kumar, the filmmaker captures the cultural and ritualistic element of a community by illustrating the relevance of god towards the life of the people of a village.

Similarly, Sonali Sharma and Shruti Nagpal demonstrate the impact of concretization of Delhi on the ecology in a broader sense in *On the Verge (2007)*. The use of animation in documentaries facilitates the development of the argument stronger in certain cases.

Documentary Sense in the Animation

Nonfiction animation operates within the broad functions of the documentary including evocation, re-enactment, and enriched reconstruction etc. through the aesthetic and artistic exhibition. However, the animation, on many occasions, proved fruitful to represent the real world or at least guides towards the reality. For instance, in *Continuous Journey (2004)*, the filmmaker, Ali Kazmi, bestowed life to the archival photographs of the historic but tragic journey of Indian citizens to Canada in 1914. Ali animated the archival images to enrich the aesthetic essence of the horrific incidents that took place during the immigration of Indian people to Canada. The expressive gradations crafted by Ali imparted fresh soul to the characters present in the photographs, including the ship - *Komagata Maru* that, in turn, enhanced their contextual expressions of the 376 rejected immigrants. The impactful power of the animation fills the gaps of visual narrative and conveys much more than a still photograph can.

In the context of the documentary, it is not only what kind of footage, archival or produced is available that matters but what the filmmaker does to the available material which John Grierson puts it as "the creative treatment of actuality" (1933). With what impact the filmmaker utilizes animation techniques with the real archival footage is a matter of apt evidence that animation does have immense capability to enhance what we can have for better visualizations and understanding. Paul Wells suggests that such tactics huge potential for a documentary. The techniques offer 'narrative transition' with the help of its rich functionalities.

An animation is a broader term that stems from a lain word "*animare*" meaning "the action of imparting life" (dictionary). Consequently, the basic meaning of animation is liveliness. The liveliness is used in context to the illusion created by a series of images that differ slightly from one another to guide the movement. However, one of the interesting attributions of animation is it timeliness that is more or less facilitated by the associated aesthetic nuances. Such facets play a very crucial role in illustrating *the* world compared to *a* world operating from the artist's mind (Nichols, 1997; Roe, 2013). The difference between *the* world and *a* world corresponds to the recording and portrayal of reality from real life that often is distinguished as nonfictional and fictional respectively. The use of animation in *ACCSEX (2013)*, Shweta Ghosh attempts to directly capture the opinion of one of the subjects *Natasha* in order to contribute to her in-depth portrayal and understanding. Therefore, besides being able to establish a rich aesthetic and expressive aura to a real story, nonfiction animation accounts for the enriched narrative of real life.

Case Studies

Nonfiction animation is specifically concerned with the production of the images of actuality. The images of actuality are based on the real and authentic information that may face limitations to be reconstructed by live action. The contemporary Indian documentarists experiment the use of animation to re-enact and reconstruct within the domain of

documentary. A few documentaries are discussed below to measure the degree and context of animation used.

In God's Land/Kadavulin Nilathil(2012)– Pankaj Rishi Kumar

In God's Land (2013), the director, Pankaj Rishi Kumar, focuses on the people living in the land who think that it belongs to God, *Sudalai Swami* - who was mythically born. They do not fight for their rights (land) with either the priests or the government who want to turn the land into a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). But they are rather willing to live their life according to God's will. The filmmaker attempts to re-enact the historical birth of the InamAlangulam village through animation.

The land belongs to a *Nizam* when a group of six families comes to live in this place. They find the land barren with no water. Everything looks dry. The ground is so hard that a mouse is trapped under it and was struggling to come out. The *Nizam* orders them to quench the thirst of the land by a small pond present there. There is a single fish in there. The villagers work hard to irrigate the land and they succeed to spark the beginning of life in the region that is beautifully illustrated through animation. A single drop of water hits a seed which bursts into a crop plant, marking a new life of the village. The grey and black tones of the graphics along with the prospective acoustic aura added depth to the narrative. The filmmaker claims that the narrative expands beyond just the story of the *InamAlangulam village*. According to the filmmaker, "using animation the film recounts the history of the land and satirizes the exploitation perpetuated by religion and class distinction" (interview with Pankaj).

The god, with the SEZ wings, comes during a rainy night destroying all the forests and converting the land open for crop cultivation. The villagers share their offerings to the god living in a temple owned by priests. The filmmaker establishes the birth of the place using animation and takes the audience back into the past revealing the coming of the god. Besides, the structured abstract depiction of animated characters illuminates the relation of the god with the people living in the village. What is more fascinating is the involvement of the people in the construction of the present situation where people offer food o the god who they believe that it is provided to them by him only. All the animated sequences define the artistic perception of the interesting story that holds the positivity among the peoples' understanding in relation to the divine nature. Evidently, the expressive artistic expression of the story confirms that the filmmaker does not have any options except illustrating it in the animated form.



Figure 1: Illustration of God, from *in God's Land*. Photo Courtesy of the Filmmaker

ACCSEX (2013) – Shweta Ghosh

Shweta's documentary about four different women with disabilities who "reclaim agency and the right to unapologetic confidence, sexual expression, and happiness" (Shweta) is worth exploration. The interesting narratives of the

life of these women redefine the new normal in the context of their living reality. *Abha, Natasha, Kanti,* and *Sonali*narrate their exclusive take on their lives within the questions of acceptance, self-assurance, and resistance to the normative. What intrigues the most is *Natasha*, a girl who is deaf and who cannot speak clearly but, she is confident enough to listen to anything and talk to anyone. Her self-assured character brings in her the quality of a normal person as she is happy to live with what she has got without any remorse or negativity. The filmmaker does well to enrich the narrative of Natasha through her crafted sketches about her life especially her first menstruation cycle and her identity.

It would have been harder to illustrate the whole narrative visually without filming the actual thing – which would compromise the dignity of the subject. Animation techniques prove really fruitful while dealing with such delicate subjects in a documentary. The animation of Natasha's sketches adds more authenticity to her story without jeopardizing her human self. Besides, she narrates her own story in her own illustrations adding more weight to the documentary. A similar documentary series was produced by a Dutch company Submarine called *Naked (Bloot)* under the direction of Misha Kamp. The series was about the sexual and social development of teenagers. It was made for TV broadcasting. Such techniques prove helpful to preserve the privacy of the subjects. Besides, sometimes "we cannot show what we capture (footage) or we cannot capture what we have to show" (Martellini, 2015) and by employing animation one can add expressive traits to all such kinds of narratives.

Not only Natasha illustrates her own self-living as an accepted individual with a bold identity but, she draws her intimate experiences including her first-time sex. I think this could only be demonstrated through animation to respect the dignity of Natasha. *Never like the first time(2007)*a.k.a. *Aldrigsom för stagången!* director Jonas Odell portrayed four characters who talk about their first-time sex. He recorded the documentary interviews for the film and later animated each of these taking audiences to the next level. Shweta addressed the delicate narrative through simple sketches along with acoustic sound effects to visualize the intimate episode of Natasha. What is fascinating about this is that this is one of its kind documentaries in India that has demonstrated such intimate episodes with rich visualizations through animation.

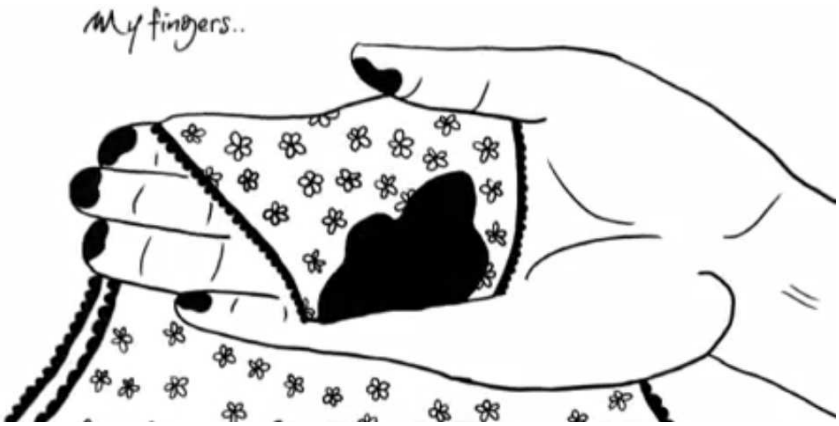


Figure 2: Illustration of the Blood on Natasha's Fingers, from *ACCSEX*. Photo Courtesy of the Filmmaker

On The Verge (2007) - Shruti Nagpal and Sonali Sharma

The film *On the Verge…*, expresses a deep concern over the continuously disturbing ecological balance of the capital city of India, Delhi. The drastic change in the ecological balance, due to rapid deforestation and construction, has kept the biodiversity on the verge of disappearance from the region. It may to the bigger consequences of their extinction. The filmmakers used animation (3D) to establish the concretization of Delhi in view of its progress and development.

The image of a flying bird against the sky-high towers and buildings illustrate something unnatural and disconcerting. The main intention of the use of animation seems to depict the present state of affairs of the bird population who have lost their nests to the human houses. Though the animation is somewhat futuristic in its appearance, it is quite enlightening enough to convey the brutalities that humans offer to this world by converting natural spaces into the urban jungle.

The animated sequence created a contrast between a flying bird in the evening and the concrete sky-high buildings; the camera follows the bird that tries to find a tree or nest until it disappears from the frame. In another sequence, a bird lives behind an antenna as its home is destroyed by the increasing obsession of humans towards concretization and development at the cost of the existing biodiversity. One of the important functions of nonfiction animation is a subject manifestation to highlight a particular point of view may it be a political, social, or economic etc. (Martelllini, 2015) in order to represent a comprehensive account of an issue. Sonali and Shruti manifested the social cause that is associated with political and economic aspects by creating a state of contrast within the animation itself that enhances the narrative of the documentary.

The filmmakers advocate the use of animation when there is no footage or there is some aspect of the narrative that is converting into somewhat unnatural, giving it a clear representation. Therefore, it is the imagination backed up by authentic data that such visualizations can be created to illustrate and manifest a crucial point. However, there is still quite a space left to depict symbolic metamorphosis of natural spaces into a concrete jungle. Metamorphosis is one of the important functions of animation that is associated with the change of form along with time. Such an aspect can be addressed by the slow and smooth transformation of the modern-day infrastructure at the cost of the important biodiversity that does play a very prominent role in maintaining the ecological balance of the world.



Figure 3: Illustration of a Concrete Jungle, from *On the Verge*
Photo Courtesy of the Filmmakers

Continuous Journey (2004) – Ali Kazmi

Ali Kazmi's *Continuous Journey 2004)* is one of a few documentaries that established aesthetic re-enactment by animating the archival photographs to augment visualizations. The film challenges the racial episode of Canada that led to the barring of 376 Indian migrants to enter the country in view of the continuous-journey regulation of the Immigration Act1908. The filmmaker's main argument in the film attempts to question the country's exclusion policies that decided the ill fate for the ship, *Komagata Maru*, in the voyage of 1914. The use of innovative animation techniques enabled Kazmi to re-enact the incident in context to well-researched factual information from Indian and Canadian historians.

Hameed and Vukov (2017) argue that the work represented by Kazmi emphasized an apparent act of mistrust and uncertainty with the help of a strong display of visual images of the disastrous journey. The authors analyzed the animation techniques by the filmmaker in context to the message it conveyed; therefore, politicizing the whole journey of the voyage through animating images. Their work falls in Gilles Deleuze's (1988) strategic "approach to the virtual as a set of forces or potentialities that evade visible or sensory form yet exert real effects—a play of presence and absence, of what Richard Fung has called "invisible evidence" (Hameed and Vukov, 2017). Besides the relationship between virtualization and actualization is well addressed by the film which Rob Shields describes as a close one. Shields asserts that the virtual is quite flexible to be depicted through performative actions and actualization is performative, ostensibly called as "an inventive drama" (Deluze, 1988; Shields, 2006; Hameed &Vukov, 2017).

Kazmi's breathtaking animation tactics developing expressive reconstructions possible actually manifests the virtualization to question Canada's immigration policy. The filmmaker comes close to make the audience perceive actualization regarding the 376 immigrants boarding *Komagata Maru*. The artistic expressions led the actualization of the fading imprints of the incident that shook the very nature of Canada's conscience, which they finally apologized for. Pablo Picasso says, "Art is a lie that makes us realizes the truth" (quoted in Barr, 1946)that quite fits with the Kazmi's attempt to bring the truth alive, which we can perceive as an audience, from the prized archival photos. Such is the power of animation in context to the actuality.

The film was well received by the critics and audience especially due to the strong argument that the film was equipped with and the intensification of the visual narrative by enhancing the aesthetic sense of the documentary using animation.



Figure 4: Gurdit Singh and Voyagers, from Continuous Journey. Photo Courtesy of the Filmmakers

DISCUSSIONS

The animated documentary tells a tale about *the* world in which we live in rather than *a* world corresponding to the artists to own experience (Nichols, 1997; Roe, 2013). The difference between the two worlds is a bigger one because of the divergent implication that the two worlds carry. *The* world specifically deals with the reality (the real world that we all share) and offers a huge scholarship to document and understand the functioning of the world. Such aspect of the reality can be well portrayed by "the creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson, 1933) that is, of course, "dependent on the specificity of its images for authenticity" (Nichols, 1994). Winsor McCay's *The Sinking of the Lusitania (1918)* was

received as a documentary that employed animation techniques to portray *the* world associated with the sinking of the ship. However, it took some time to reach and practice nonfiction animation in the Indian context. All the three films mentioned above are the contemporary documentary projects, for example, *On the Verge.*…was released in 2007. *Continuous Journey* was released in 2004 and the documentarist, Ali Kazmi, is the Indo-Canadian person who enjoys a broader cultural legacy of India as well. His documentary can be looked at through the Indian context depending on the main subjects he portrayed in the film. But what is more important is that "animation with the documentary sense" (Wells, 1998) somehow finds its way to enter into the mainstream documentary of the country and with greater impact.

The above-discussed documentaries experimented with different animation styles and techniques, which enabled the documentarists to build an expressive and artistic tension in the argument. For example, *In God's Land,* the documentarist used 2-Dimensional animation and puppet animation produced with the help of editing software. The black and grey tones along with white gradations created an in-depth essence of the illustrations. Besides, the animator worked in different layers to ensure accurate timing and actions. *ACCSEX* used the illustrations fashioned by Natasha and the director directly used these illustrations to manifest the subject's experience and point of view. The animation falls in classic animation category that focuses on the creation of sketches and later put together on a timeline to create an illusion of movement.

In *Continuous Journey*, Ali Kazmi's artistic fervor developed expressive shades of the voyagers through 2.5D animation technique, which falls somewhere in between 2-Dimensional and 3-Dimensional animation. The technique gives depth to the photographs that, in turn, intensified the emotional etiquette of the images. Furthermore, the main archival found photograph was faded and that was fixed for more clarity and animation. The components of the photograph were broken down into layers to get the desired 2.5D animation, which is phenomenal. Finally, *On the Verge.*…employed 3D animation, created by Atul Sinha, to get the in-depth look and feel of the buildings. Such a technique is being quite used on a large scale to ensure prominent depth in the composition. However, the rendered video meets the requirements of the prevailing environmental circumstances to illustrate an expressive view of the changing landscape of Delhi.

The diverse animation techniques employed in the above films establish a broader perspective of the animation medium towards documentary. The animation choices have already launched a 'transitional paradigm' with the documentary domain by encouraging the filmmakers to penetrate deeper into the real world. Specifically speaking, animation on many occasions still need to justify its role towards documentary but, that is not the case because of the fact that animation also possesses a sense of documentary to record and document reality (Wells, 1998). However, it is important to mention that the question of realism and authenticity is still debated in the documentary filmmaking because of the subjective choices at its every stage and the truth is connected with the concept of realism in the documentary. The notions of realism can be well established in documentary through the indexical relationship between the images and reality (Roe, 2013). All the documentaries tried to enhance their individual arguments through expressive and artistic fervor of animation and most of the time the documentarists succeed. Besides, the visual narrative elevated the expectations of the audience with the new strategies that encompass the truth and authenticity behind the development of the art.

CONCLUSIONS

Animated documentary is associated with the term nonfiction animation or documentary animation, which is concerned with the portrayal of the real world. Besides, getting into a big debate of whether animation can capture and

represent reality, it is the time to move forward in view of the fact that animation has already proved itself within the domain of the documentary. Following the transitional paradigm, Indian documentarists seem to realize the functions of animation to enhance and facilitate reality augmenting the purpose of the documentary itself. The medium serves as the best option to re-enact and reconstruct for intensified documentary discourse. Nonfiction animation operates with the fascinating characteristic of condensation, synecdoche, and performance etc. which offers a broader perspective to documentary storytelling genre. Not only at the bigger production level but, the use of nonfiction animation is possible at individual levels now throughout the world due to the easy access to technological innovations. More and more people revert to the animation techniques especially hand-drawn sketches and illustrations to depict their say.

Whether it is about the North Korean prison torture or an intimate experience of schizophrenia people take the animation route to express their insights artistically. However, the practice of nonfiction animation is still at the developing stage in India but, the documentarists have started observing its impact on the inclusive storytelling of real narrative.

Further Research

The current research study deals with the implementation of nonfiction animation by Indian documentarists along with the techniques involved. Also, the impact of the techniques was also explored on the documentary genre itself in context to the representation of reality and actuality. The study opens a wide platform for nonfiction animation research in the country whereby the scholars can focus on the development and progress of the art in dealing with the record and depiction of the actuality contextualizing John Grierson's and Paul Wells's understanding of the two diverse fields – documentary and animation.

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